

ROSEMARIE BECK





Rosemarie Beck

Le Maquillage / Magdalen

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Space of Desire:

The Paintings of Rosemarie Beck

by Jennifer Samet

Rosemarie Beck, who was first a violinist and studied art history at Oberlin College, had three exhibitions of abstract painting in the 1950s at Peridot Gallery in New York, before gradually transitioning into representational painting. Her first narrative subject was *Le Maquillage* (a woman in an interior applying make-up). She would later paint nudes, Lovers, and mythological and literary narratives. Her favorite subjects included Orpheus, Antigone, Phaedra, and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

She was also deeply interested in astrology, and intended to represent all twelve signs and twelve houses of the wheel of the horoscope. But, she said, she got stuck on the House of Venus. What interested her was not just the romance, or the sex, but the spectrum of Venus: the passion and sensuality that fuels art-making, words, music. And she loved all this, a fierce intellectual who was inspired even by the stage direction asides of Shakespeare, like the line, "Enter Mariners, wet."

At the same time, Beck was a child of Abstract Expressionism and modernism. She and her husband, the literary critic and Colette scholar, Robert Phelps, lived in Woodstock, New York in the 1950s. There she met and befriended Philip Guston and Bradley Walker Tomlin, and through Tomlin, studied with Robert Motherwell. Beck insisted that formal issues, like the picture plane, were her



Study for Earthly Paradise
1992 oil/cardboard 7½ x 10¾ in.



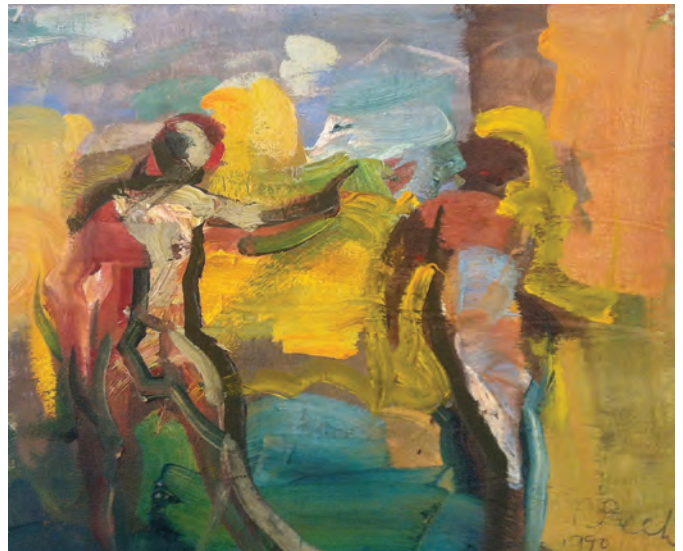
Icarus
1980 oil/cardboard 8 x 10½ in.

From the Antigone
1990 oil/cardboard 8 x 9½ in.

number one concern. However, she liked the tension between narrative and the intrinsic abstraction of her paintings. She wanted the paradox, the ability to find your way around a form in a painting, even though it was flat.

As a person, she was funny and provocative. Provocation was a way to step up this level of tension, infuse a normally asexual or “formal” situation with real human issues and dramas. She recalls being on a panel discussion with Leland Bell and asking him about one of his paintings, showing a man and woman in bed, “Am I correct in assuming that this is about the loss of innocence?” She was met with complete silence. Bell refused to analyze the narrative content of his work, preferring to discuss formal issues.

For Beck, the true and personal voice of the artist needed to be honored. Her own voice, her own loves, included literary and mythological narratives. Orpheus, Antigone, Phaedra, and *The Tempest* are all stories of forbidden loves and exile. And Beck subjected herself to a form of exile, becoming a figurative painter in the 1960s.





Beck spoke about her personal interest in “opening” up paintings, and divided artists into categories of open versus closed—not a qualitative ranking, just two different types. She opened her paintings to incorporate these narrative worlds, and she complicated them: it is difficult to de-code a painting like *Le Maquillage*, with its mirroring and representation of the self portrait, the model, internal depictions of the painting, and another painting.

Beck’s unique way of painting also opens up that space between painted form and the actual, depicted object. In all painting, the space between flatness and tactility is a space between longing and having. It is a space of desire. Beck’s hatched stroke, the way her paintings are woven, the way she pieces forms together with marks, increases this space of desire. In contrast, it is an act of possession to fluidly find one’s way around form. Beck made paintings about human desire and jealousy, and she deliberately left her forms open, with those woven, hatched marks. By not closing lines, she keeps herself, and us, in a state of partial exile, a tantalizing state of longing, not possessing.

ABOVE:

Study for Prospero’s Cave
1978
oil/cardboard 8½ x 14 in.





Le Maquillage II

1961-62 oil/linen 54½ x 76 in.

Studio in Venice
1963-64 oil/linen 52 x 70 in.









Studio with Magdalen
1964 oil/linen 52 x 70 in.

FRONT COVER:

Magdalen
1964 oil/linen 32 x 26 in.
private collection

BACK COVER:

Apollo and Daphne Study
(detail)
1982 oil/paper 15 x 11 in.

An abstract painting featuring thick, expressive brushstrokes in a variety of earthy and vibrant colors. The palette includes shades of ochre, sienna, terracotta, deep red, teal, and forest green, all layered and blended to create a rich, textured surface. The composition is dense and non-representational, focusing on color and form.

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